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ABSTRACT

Preservice teachers must see appropriate instruction in action; they must see content in conjunction with process. Content, process, and active student involvement are necessary for the creation of new cognitive structures that are congruent with the view that reading is an interactive-constructive process. Three types of literacy course assignments that reflect these beliefs are: "kidwatching" in both formal and informal settings; designing an activity that goes beyond merely reading and discussing a selection from a book; and journal writing to record reflections, ask questions, and share experiences. Thematic planning is another related activity, using a web approach. Many possibilities exist for including children's literature in active student-centered lessons while teaching the content and process of literacy acquisition. (Includes a list of books used in the author's literacy courses.) (CR)

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Exploring Content Subject Literature in Literacy Method Courses

Learning about teaching is like learning about many other things. Our beliefs and prior experiences form schemata that affects our construction of new schemata for teaching. To create change in the schemata students bring with them to our courses, we must change cognitive structures related to teacher actions and student involvement (Craig, Bright, & Smith, 1994). Most of our students have memories of language arts instruction that were based on passive student models and knowledge transmission processes. Therefore, our role involves creating new experiences that become the bases from which the new cognitive structures are formed. Craig, Bright, and Smith note, "it is not enough for teachers to tell students what they should do. Preservice teachers must see appropriate instruction in action; they must see content in conjunction with process" (p. 96). They also stress the importance of active involvement in this process. My presentation is focused around the belief that content, process, and active student involvement are necessary for the creation of new cognitive structures that are congruent with the view that reading is an interactive-constructive process.

During the past several years I have taught a variety of literacy courses. Each of these courses has been characterized by strategies and practices which combine content, process, and active student involvement. They are also characterized by the use of children's literature as a focus for the instruction. Recently, I have begun to feature children's tradebooks that can be linked with content area subjects or linked to thematic units. During this presentation, I will share some of the literature and strategies that I have used and will also share some of the student responses to these activities, strategies, and to the courses that I have taught in this manner.

One of the goals for my classes is to insure that my assignments are authentic and congruent with my beliefs about teaching and learning. Therefore, I often base my assignments in the real world of children and schools. In almost every literacy course that I teach, three types of assignments are included. One is a kidwatching activity of some sort.

Ideally, the kidwatching takes place in schools in both formal and informal settings. However, I also encourage students to make kidwatching a habit that occurs in malls, McDonald's, or anywhere that they happen to be. I tell them that they can learn about kids and about their language growth wherever kids are. The only equipment that is needed are good eyes and ears. I also encourage them to observe children of different ages, genders, and socio-economic levels. Comparing and contrasting what the students learn becomes natural and appropriate. This activity is usually one of the first ones that I do because it forms the basis for the rest of our work together.

Student responses have been overwhelmingly supportive. The students reveal that this activity not only increases their awareness of children, their interests, and other differences, but that it quickly becomes habit forming. Throughout the course, they continue to report their observations of children. Some have said that it became so habitual, that their family and friends have teased them about their preoccupations. I believe that one reason this is so accepted is that all students can succeed, no matter how well they have been at kidwatching before. Everyone improves. They are always eager to share what they observed and heard.

A second assignment is always some activity with a book. I require them to design something that goes beyond merely reading and discussing a selection. Ideally, the students are able to share their activity with actual children. When students are able to share the activity, their reactions indicate how much they learn. Listen to some of their own reactions to this assignment.

One student noted:

Throughout the story I would stop and show Leah particular words. I came to the conclusion that she did not yet associate the letters with the words that I read. I felt that only the pictures and what I said related to her. This surprised me. I did not realize that children did not know this yet. I now understand even more how important concepts of print really are. Reading to these two children proved to me how special it can be to read to

students. The fact that Matthew listened, even though he didn't show the deep interest that Leah did, proved that age does not really matter when it comes to children enjoying being read to...This experience showed me that teachers need to know the stages of development for children. If a teacher expects more than a student is capable of doing, they will both feel failure.

Another wrote:

I learned that different children, depending on their age, find the same story meaningful in different ways. Although Andrew did not understand the content of the story, he liked sitting with Missy and me. He also enjoyed looking at the pictures, hearing the expressions in my voice, and watching Missy's facial expressions as I read. He didn't understand the story, but he understood the social aspect of story reading, sitting still, listening, looking at what is being read.

A final assignment common to my literacy courses, is journal writing. The journals have provided a place for students to record reflections, to ask questions, and to share experiences. My students and I usually look forward to the chance to communicate on an individual level. I often find that students express thoughts in journals that never come out in class. My journals are usually open-ended, however I usually do ask the students to review what they have learned for the final entry. Most are astounded at what they have accomplished.

While these three types of assignments are common to my literacy courses, other assignments vary with the nature of the course. For example, in my content reading course, I ask students to observe and/or interview a content area teacher. Most students choose to do both. I ask them to question the teacher about problems students have reading the particular content and strategies that the teachers uses that help the students achieve success. If they observe, they are also asked to look for examples of strategies that we have discussed in class. Several arrange to interview multiple teachers or compare the teacher that they have observed/interviewed with their high school teachers or others who

they know. I asked the students for feedback on this assignment. Unanimously they indicated that they had learned while doing it and that it was extremely valuable to them.

As I noted earlier, I promote the use of children's literature with the activities that I demonstrate and that I require my students to do in class. I usually divide my students into several groups of from three to five students. Each group is given different directions and different books to use in completing their directions. After a suitable amount of time has passed, each group is responsible for summarizing their book or books, relating their task, and indicating their findings to the others. This procedure works well because students are exposed to a variety of literature and a variety of activities. We can also discuss the developmental appropriateness of the activity for children and the skill or skills developed by the activity. Students have commented that this process is an "excellent way to convey all the heavy-duty theoretical stuff into 'what does this mean for the teacher in the classroom.'"

A recent lesson of mine for my content reading class involved reading an excerpt from the *Lincoln: A Photobiography* by Russell Freedman to the class. The excerpt expresses Lincoln's dream about his own assassination. Following the reading, I asked students to tell me how this passage made them feel and what they learned about Lincoln. Many commented on the human side of Lincoln that was expressed (his fear of being killed, how difficult and worried he must have been). I skipped a portion of the chapter and read the end, where the contents of his pockets on the day he died is revealed. Students were shocked that he had kept clippings that favored him for his stance on slavery. I asked them if they would like to learn more about the events that led to his assassination. There was a unanimous "yes" vocalized. I gave each group a book about either the Civil War or Lincoln or some tie to the issue of slavery. I asked them to use the book to find out as much as they could about what led to Lincoln's assassination. For the groups that were using chapter books, I asked them to choose one chapter and focus on it. Groups then reported back. As each group reported, students asked questions, volunteer

prior knowledge, and aided in discussion. At the close of this session, I asked students to raise their hands if they had learned something. Most couldn't believe that I asked that question because it was so obvious to them that they had learned. They unanimously indicated "yes." I then commented, "and all we did was read and use children's books." I heard audible "wows." I paused a few seconds and initiated discussion of the benefits and content or other adaptations of such a lesson. Students were amazed that so much could be done. One commented to me later, "why do teachers use textbooks and lecture when they could make it so much more interesting for the students?" Books used for this lesson included: *Lincoln: A Photobiography, Amos Fortune, Free Man, Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky, Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt, The story of Harriet Tubman, Conductor of the Underground Railroad, Lincoln's Little Girl, Follow the Drinking Gourd, Dear Willie Rudd, Pink and Say.*

I have also begun to require that my students have some exposure to thematic planning. This often begins as an in-class group activity centered around a piece of children's literature that I read to the class. I usually use a web approach to thematic planning. Students are asked to brainstorm within their groups subject matter connections to the theme of the book. These are then shared. Following such sharing, groups are usually ready to work more independently. I provide several different children's books suitable for thematic planning and ask each group to choose a theme based on the book, and to develop content connections and sample activities. Sharing follows their work. Students often chime in to help a group that was unable to make connections to a particular content area or will add ideas to those presented by the group. They are interested in hearing about the books that the other groups used and in expressing additional ideas for integration. From this point, students are usually ready to work on individual projects that require thematic planning.

Many assignments are quite flexible in nature. This allows students to design something which is has personal relevance. For many, this is a difficult task. The lack of

specific guidelines worries some students. However, several of the students who express concern, note that the flexible nature of the assignment caused them to think, research, and labor over this assignment more than for other types of assignments. As with all my assignments, I ask students to share their work with each other and to offer each other feedback. This peer feedback is followed by allowing students to make what I term "final comments" to me about their work. Often the "final comments" include other ways activities could be completed or modifications that other students have suggested. Many students have commented that they look forward to these sharing times for the feedback on their work and a chance to improve it before I see it and because they learn strategies and ideas from each other.

Many students are quite positive about the courses. One commented, "This was an outstanding course. There was so much practical application. I was in awe of the children's literature that was presented." Still another student wrote, "Although I had never taken an education course before this, I received a great wealth of practical knowledge which served as a good base for understanding. I enjoyed the projects which helped me in understanding the concepts of the text better." One student recently commented about the class saying, "I never realized what whole language was before, but now I know. That's the way you teach us. It's so authentic. Everything you do has meaning for us -- even the assignments are authentic." However, while all these comments are positive, not all students react favorably to this approach.

I have had students who disagree with this process. Some of these students have objected to the amount of group work and openly have suggested that my courses do not include enough theory. These students often suggest more lecture. One even commented that I was the worst professor that s/he has had in six years of coursework! My own conclusion is that these students have learning styles which are different than most of the students that I teach. Sometimes these students also come into the course with more clearly defined purposes or more advanced levels of knowledge. Some also have a preconceived

notion of what a graduate course should be like. When I don't fit the model, they feel that I must not be doing what I should be as a professor.

The list below includes some of the books that I have used with my students in literacy courses. They are grouped by the instructional topics.

WRITING ACTIVITIES:

Mini-lessons -- excerpts from *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, excerpts from *The Gold Cadillac*

Characterization, Point of view -- *Picnic, First Snow, Pancakes for Breakfast*
I, Columbus, The Log of Christopher Columbus,
Pedro's Journal, Encounter, fairy tales and variations

COMPARISON/CONTRAST ACTIVITIES

Look, Look Again

I, Columbus, The Log of Christopher Columbus, Pedro's Journal, In 1492

Grandfather's Journey, How Many Days to America

VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

A House is a House for Me, Galimoto, Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs

RESEARCH SKILLS

The Buck Stops Here, My Fellow Americans, Birth Order Blues, books on the Civil War and Revolutionary War

AUTHOR STUDY

Lynne Cherry -- *The Kapok Tree, The River Ran Wild, The Armadillo from Amarillo*

Patricia Polacco -- *Mrs. Katz and Tush, Just Plain Fancy, Pink and Say*

Jerry Palotta -- *The Ocean Alphabet Book, The Extinct Animal Book, The Icky Bug Counting Book, The Flower Alphabet Book, The Furry Animal Book*

WEBBING/THEMATIC PLANNING

A Piece of String is a Wonderful Thing ,The Wheeling and Whirling Around Book, The Armadillo from Amarillo, The Librarian Who Measured the Earth.

These books and activities are only some of the many possibilities that exist for including children's literature in active student-centered lessons while teaching the content and process of literacy acquisition.

Reference

Craig, M. T., Bright, R. M., & Smith, S. A. (1994). Preservice teachers' reactions to an interactive constructive approach to English language arts coursework. *Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(2), 96-103.